

February 24, 2000: Commission Urges Action to Protect Iranian Baha'is

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Feb. 24, 2000Contact:

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kansas) held a joint press conference today to demand nullification of the death sentences handed down to three local leaders of the Baha'i faith in Mashdad, Iran. Nearly 200 Baha'is have been put to death since the Islamic Revolution in 1979; the Baha'i religion has been declared illegal in the land of its origin. "The Baha'is on death row must be freed without delay and the systemic persecution of the Baha'i community must stop," said Rabbi David Saperstein, the Commission's chairman. "The Iranian Government should understand that the world is watching." "The results of the recent Iranian elections show that significant changes in attitude are sweeping the country," Chairman Saperstein said. "The reformist politicians who came into power have promised a government based on the constitution and the rule of law. An indispensable place to start would be to respect Iran's international commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to permit freedom of religion and belief." Vice Chair Michael Young said the Commission commended President Clinton for speaking out in support of the three Baha'is. The Commission, he said, is calling upon the U.S. government to take additional actions in support of the Iranian Baha'is on death row: The State Department should introduce a resolution in the United Nations Security Council condemning these death sentences and the general persecution of Baha'is in Iran. State should also again co-sponsor in the upcoming session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission a resolution condemning Iran's repression of religious freedom. The House and Senate should pass the pending sense-of-the-Congress resolution insisting that these men be freed and Baha'is be recognized as full citizens and left in peace. Statement of Chairman David Saperstein and Vice Chairman Michael Young,

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

February 24, 2000My name is Rabbi David Saperstein. I serve as Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. The Commission was created by Congress to monitor issues of international religious freedom and to advise the Congress, President, and Secretary of State on how to address issues of religious persecution. We come before you today to address a most urgent manifestation of religious persecution: The plight of the Baha'is in Iran and the death sentence imposed on three members of that faith as a punishment for practicing their religion. In 1997, Sirus Zabihi Moghaddam and Hedayat Kashefi Najafabadi were arrested in the Iranian city of Mashdad for holding monthly Baha'i "family life" meetings. For this so-called "crime," the two were sentenced to death by an Iranian revolutionary court along with Manuchehr Khulusi, who was arrested in 1999. These three men's only known offense was to practice their Baha'i faith in the land of its origin. Twice the Supreme Court in Tehran has dismissed their sentences and each time the Revolutionary Court in Mashdad has reinstated them. Their latest 20-day window of appeal closed yesterday, Feb. 23. While there are conflicting reports on their status, we understand that they could be executed at any time. These are just the latest in an alarming pattern of persecution of Baha'is in Iran since 1979. More than 200 Baha'is have been executed since the Islamic Revolution. Hundreds have been imprisoned -- twelve are now in prison and five, including the Mashdad three, are on death row. This is part of a deliberate Iranian government policy to suppress Baha'is in Iran: Their faith is declared a heresy and a conspiracy and the 300,000 Baha'is have no legal rights. They are denied government jobs and pensions. Their marriages and divorces are not recognized and they are denied the right to inherit property. Their cemeteries, holy places, and community properties were seized and many destroyed. They cannot organize as a community or run religious schools. Baha'i youths are not allowed to attend university. Official documents dated February 25, 1991 and revealed by the United Nations Human Rights Commission in 1993 set forth this Iranian government policy. The results of the recent Iranian elections show that significant changes in attitude are sweeping the country. The Iranian people have tired of the heavy hand of repression - including repression of minority religions and of differing interpretations of Islam that would be considered mainstream elsewhere. The reformist politicians who have swept into power have promised a government based on the constitution and the rule of law. An indispensable place to start would be to respect Iran's international commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to permit freedom of religion and belief. The Baha'is on death row must be freed without delay and the systemic persecution of the Baha'i community must stop. The Iranian Government should understand that the world is watching and will judge them by their deeds, not their words. In accordance with the Commission's responsibility under the International Religious Freedom Act to advise the administration and Congress regarding international religious freedom issues, I would like to call upon the Commission's Vice Chair, Dean Michael Young of the George Washington University Law School to discuss our recommendations. The Commission commends President Clinton for speaking out on this issue last week and calls upon the U.S. government to take the following additional actions in support of the Iranian Baha'is on death row: The State Department should introduce a resolution in the United Nations Security Council condemning these death sentences and the general persecution of Baha'is in Iran; State should also again co-sponsor in the upcoming session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission a resolution condemning Iran's repression of religious freedom; And the House and Senate should pass the pending sense-of-the-Congress resolution insisting that these men be freed and Baha'is be recognized as full citizens and left in peace. One last observation - the Iranian government is reportedly asking for a sign from the United States that it is ready to ease up on its sanctions against Iran. Those sanctions are in place not only because Iran has supported terrorism, but because of its egregious record of religious persecution. Last September, Iran was listed by the

State Department as a "Country of Particular Concern" for religious repression and sanctioned under the International Religious Freedom Act. If the Iranian government wants better relations with the West, among the first steps it should take is to throw out these barbaric death sentences and release the condemned Baha'is.

Rabbi David Saperstein, Chair

- Dean Michael K. Young, Vice Chair Hon. Elliott Abrams Laila Al-Marayati, M.D. Hon. John R. Bolton Firuz Kazemzadeh Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick Nina Shea Justice Charles Z. Smith Ambassador Robert Seiple, Ex-Officio Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director